

Opinion Pieces

Flipping the Debate – A reflection on whether flipped learning is a challenge, an opportunity or a necessity

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APT2015 'Flipping the Institution: Higher Education in the post Digital Age' focused on exploring the challenges and opportunities created by the rapid changes in technology and their potential effects in higher education. 'Is flipped learning a challenge, an opportunity or a necessity?' (Stripe and Carrier, 2015) presented the idea that flipped learning is anything that challenges the traditional teacher led model of classroom teaching, especially by introducing technology (FLIP LEARNING, 2016). The idea was, to use a flipped learning format (i.e. one that transcends the traditional), to present information and collect thoughts from the audience, primarily teachers of higher education, about the future of flipped learning. The session, a mix of information delivery and discussion, involved the use of mentimeter (Mentimeter, 2016) – an online tool that allows, via smart phones, voting and commenting during a presentation. The intention was to highlight the challenges and opportunities of flipped classrooms by using some of the techniques for flipping learning mentioned in the presentation, to collect opinions from the audience. I would like to look into some of those responses and reflect on what they mean for post-digital education. In addition, the interactions that came from the use of the technology also interested me, as they highlighted a disparity between verbal and online communication; this disparity I think needs to be considered as we move further into the technological realm.

Data collection and classroom dynamics

One aim was to gauge audience opinion about flipped learning and the future of technology in higher education. Using Mentimeter provided a good, if unintended, view of how verbal

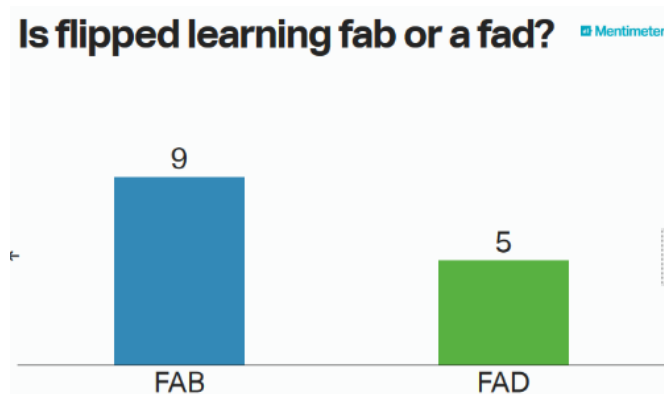


Figure 1: Data collected in answer to: 'Is flipped learning fab or a fad'

and online communications coexist.

Figure 1 shows that flipped learning was considered a fad by five audience members; however, further discussion highlighted that this was not, in every case, owing to a feeling that learning technology is going to die out, but rather that terminology is likely to change and evolve with the technology. Adding an online component into the discussion highlighted the way group dynamics change, or don't, in relation to the type of communication. There was a noticeable time lag between the start of small group discussions and the moment when digital comments began

appearing on the board suggesting participant nervousness about being first to contribute publicly via an instant feedback system, much as you may expect with a classroom discussion. However, once the initial barrier was overcome, there was a constant stream of comments. This combination of online and verbal methods, a cornerstone of flipped learning,

does seem to demonstrate a distinction between participants' preferred modes of communication: some communicate more comfortably in verbal discussion; others prefer to embrace technology to express themselves. Both semantics and dynamics highlight one of the major, and perhaps less obvious, challenges in developing flipped learning. The language we use to describe technology and the communication techniques we use to 'flip' classrooms need careful consideration. Failure to do so may exacerbate challenges (Johnson *et al*, 2015) and insecurities that already exist when technology is deployed as an educational tool.

With hindsight, I should have asked the initial questions that started the session again at the end of the session to capture any changes of opinion brought about in light of the information presented and the resulting discussions. However, noting a change in opinion as a number on a graph would not have given the information gained from the discussion. One respondent who initially answered '*fab*' changed their mind after hearing statistics about current usage of technology and its evolution in education during the presentation. I am not sure I agree that flipped learning is a fad. The statistics are based upon available technologies which, as with the vocabulary, will evolve or die out, but the concept of flipped learning will continue to develop. The technology may change and we may call our flipped classrooms by different names but I think the challenges to the status quo of accepted pedagogical styles from new technology will continue to cause change and development in education. This is the 'necessity' of flipped learning: as society becomes more dependent on technology than ever before, education must follow suit. However, the interactions described here show that without the combination of both online and verbal communication something important can be lost so when introducing an online aspect to education a balance must be struck between the two.

Online tools can be used to collect massive amounts of data but one sentence can also have an impact. For example, "*we could do that on flip chart paper*" or "*that looks cool but I don't know how to do it*". To me, these comments from the audience are opposite sides of the same coin: One attitude - Why use tech? The other - I can't use tech! Addressing this requires taking a step away from the language and techniques surrounding flipped learning and taking a step towards supporting it. I should like to see that done by demonstration and the sharing of good practice across institutions to move flipped learning from a hypothetical concept to something which is being done to a high standard and actively supported.

Words in the cloud

Supporting and encouraging development of technology enhanced learning requires discussion between educators, managers and learning technologists. The second part of the presentation attempted to start such a discussion and collect comments from small groups and use them to stimulate and encourage conversation across the whole audience. The process had a hesitant start, but some good comments were made.

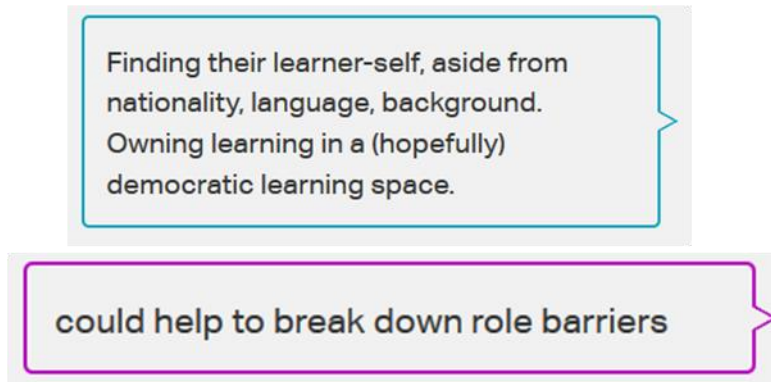


Figure 2: Answers to “What opportunities does flipped learning offer to students and educators?”

The audience responses in Figure 2 suggest opportunities that may be outside the accepted pedagogical benefits of flipped learning (FLIP LEARNING, 2016). Changing the status quo causes inevitable changes to people’s roles in learning scenarios, but I had never really thought of existing roles as barriers, considering them to be just a normal feature of the education system of which I have always been a part. However, in changing those roles, students and educators need to evaluate their own knowledge base and how they share and absorb that knowledge, much in the same way as the language and communication evolves. It follows that ownership of learning will be a beneficial by-product of these role re-evaluations. By challenging roles, students become more aware of their own learning and I hope that this process will make learners more engaged, more active and ultimately more successful.

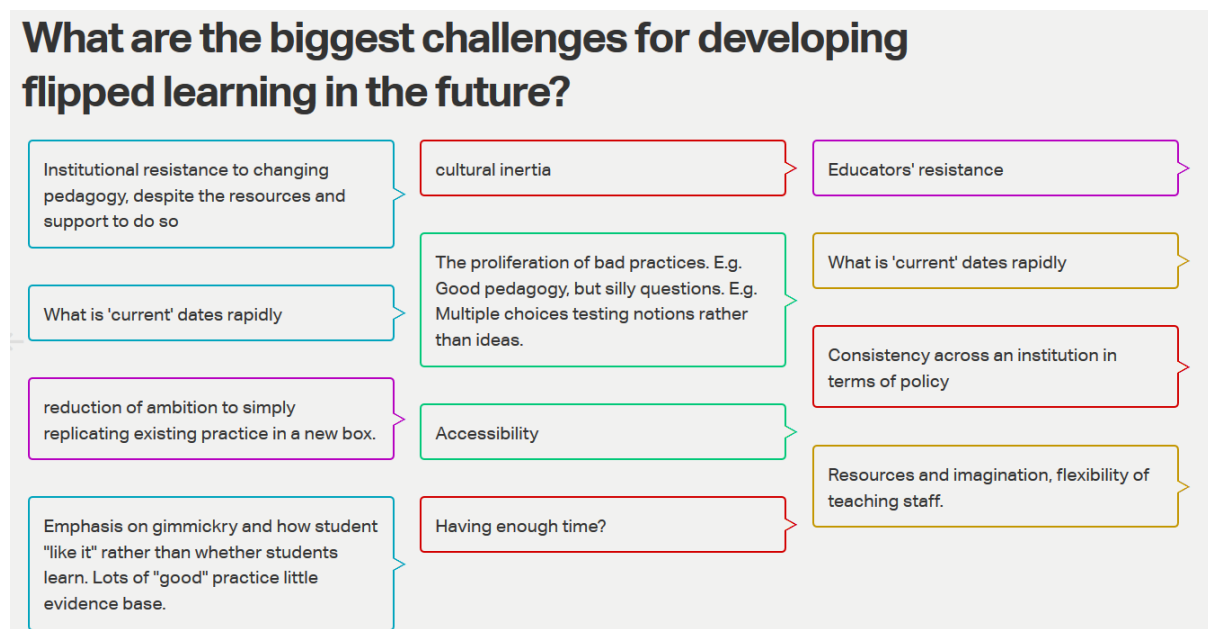


Figure 3: Responses to: "What are the biggest challenges for developing flipped learning in the future?"

Responses to the question in Figure 3 may be split into two distinct areas; challenges personal to the educators and wider institutional challenges. It is my general belief that those personal challenges of “*educator resistance*” and “*having enough time*” could be addressed by working on some of the institutional challenges. Flipped learning will develop through the imagination of the engaged few, but to make it widespread and ‘normal’ I think that there needs to be much more institutional involvement. The comments I should like to draw on are “*consistency across an institution in terms of policy*” and “*the proliferation of bad practices*”. I hope a sensible implementation of the first, with good pedagogical and technological support, combined with well-structured communication strategies, would much reduce bad practice. Professional educators are exactly that: professional. However, institutions cannot expect them to imagine, implement and manage new concepts alone and for the results to be of a consistently high quality (VISUALISTAN, 2016). Nevertheless, I don’t believe that a top-down management approach to learning technologies is the best way to go, or that there is a simple solution. This is a process that is going to take time to evolve and requires co-operation between grass-roots educators and their institutions. Management support for classroom-level innovation and encouragement of shared good practice should encourage more educators to take up the challenge and establish a set of policies that take into account the needs of students and educators by a dynamic process of experimentation and negotiation with policy makers.

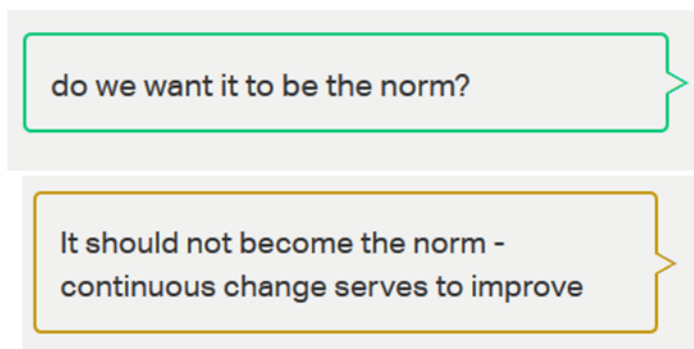


Figure 4: Answers to: “What needs to change in order for flipped learning to become the norm?”

The final question raised many good comments, most of which fed directly from the previous discussion on institutional change, but the two comments in Figure 4 are the ones I should like to finish on. To the first comment, I should like to give my own personal answer: Yes! I want my vision of flipped learning to become the norm (Of course, that is what every megalomaniac wants!), but I should like to quantify that by responding to the second point, which, despite the obvious contradiction, I also agree with. I believe things need to change (and, to some extent, that change will be forced upon higher education), but I don’t see that change as a simple shift from one paradigm to another. As we introduce technology into our classrooms and lecture halls, we shall see changes in communication and language and in the way we interact with other people; these all need to become part of a constantly-evolving pedagogical mindset that is adaptable enough to accept the new technologies and evolve with them.

When I was a university student ten years ago, I did not have my own computer, much less an internet-enabled device that went everywhere with me. The rate of change in technology has gone up exponentially and higher education can’t just watch: it needs to find a way of

reacting to that change and evolving with it. The title of the presentation was 'Is flipped learning an opportunity, challenge or necessity?' It was, and still is, my belief that flipped learning is all three.

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